

Leading for Effective Teaching

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How School Systems Can Support Principal Success

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2009, seven school districts and four charter management organizations (CMOs) joined with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as Partnership Sites to Empower Effective Teaching. In these sites, system, board, and union leaders committed to redesign how they develop, evaluate, recognize, and retain effective teachers as a foundation for improving teaching and learning. Now those efforts are bringing critical questions of school leadership to the fore, driving changes in expectations for principals and for how school systems organize to support principals and other instructional leaders.

Principals are being called on to play a key role in a new continuum of instructional leadership, extending from the central office to the classroom and focused on fostering effective teaching for every student. But national research suggests that school systems still have far to go to help principals and other leaders fulfill that promise. As key personnel in this continuum, principals are challenged to find time to focus on instructional leadership. On average, urban school principals spend only 8 to 17 percent of their time on activities related to instructional leadership, and some evidence suggests that half of those activities lack sufficient focus to have any real chance of helping teachers improve instruction.

The challenge is not entirely surprising. Many principals simply have not had opportunities to acquire the necessary body of knowledge and skills to be effective leaders of instructional improvements in their schools.

And this gap in expertise is just one of several major challenges that school systems must address to enable principals to be successful leaders of learning. Even highly skilled principals say they face great obstacles in carving out enough time for instructional leadership amid the many other demands of their jobs. And too many principals receive mixed signals about which leadership practices offer the greatest leverage for improving classroom instruction and student learning, a significant problem given the real constraints on principals' time.

This report is one product of a broader Principal Leadership Knowledge Development project sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It seeks to describe how the principalship is changing in school districts and CMOs that have adopted sophisticated new teacher development and evaluation systems and to highlight emerging strategies in partnership sites and several other systems for better supporting principals as instructional leaders and human capital managers. We hope this

report can inform similar conversations about school leadership taking place in local communities and states around the country.

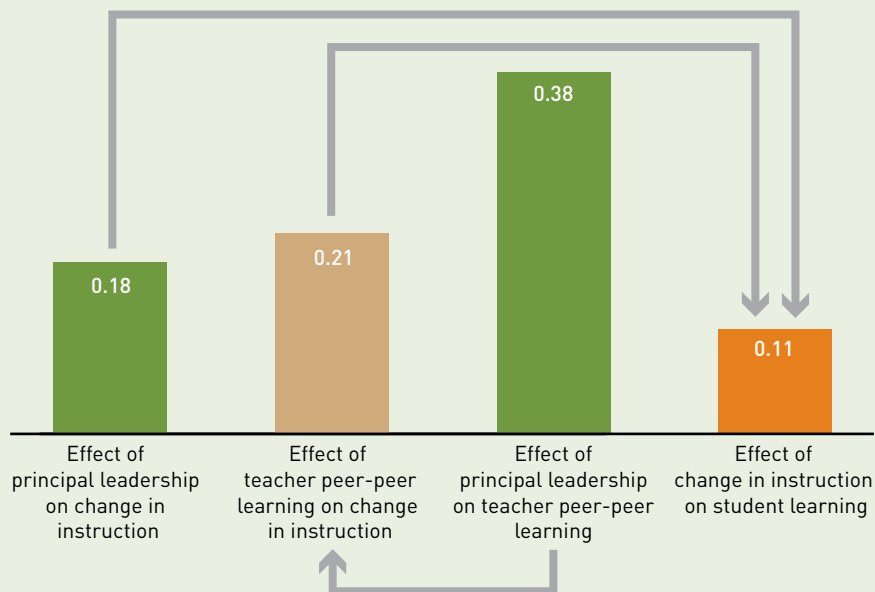
The report focuses on three broad “action areas” that show considerable promise for helping principals meet new expectations: **clarify** the principal’s role as an instructional leader by specifying the high-impact practices for which principals will be accountable; **develop** principals’ instructional leadership practices through job-embedded supports that build expertise; and **enable** principals to succeed as instructional leaders by providing sufficient time and strategic supports to perform the job well.

1. Clarify the principal’s role as an instructional leader by specifying the high-impact practices for which principals will be accountable

School systems can reap important benefits by reaching agreement with principals on a common vision for instructional leadership that is granular enough to specify high-impact leadership practices. First, principals can benchmark their own day-to-day practices against a clear set of expectations; no one can effectively perform a job that’s been nebulously defined. Second, principals can more efficiently learn from one another because they share a common focus and frame of reference for professional conversations about leadership practice. Finally, school system leaders and central office staff can align all of the policies and programs that “touch” principals—from recruitment and selection to evaluation to professional development—to support them in achieving excellence in a defined set of leadership practices.

Pathways of Principal Impact in a Mid-Sized Urban District

Evidence from a recent study at the University of Pennsylvania suggests that principal leadership has a direct and positive impact on classroom instruction (0.18). But principal leadership also has an impact on teachers’ professional opportunities to learn from and with one another (0.38), which in turn has a positive impact on classroom instruction (0.21). Finally, changes in classroom instruction are positively related to better student achievement in English/language arts (0.11).



To that end, a growing number of school systems are **focusing more attention on instructional leadership and human capital practices in principal recruitment, selection, and evaluation**. Some now require candidates to prove that they can accurately observe lessons and provide feedback to teachers or to demonstrate that they can plan and deliver strong professional development for teachers. Some are designing new evaluation systems for school leaders that expect principals to develop a much keener understanding of the quality and instruction across classrooms, to more strategically select and retain teachers based on their effectiveness, and to help all teachers improve their classroom effectiveness over time.

2. *Develop* principals' instructional leadership practices through job-embedded supports that build expertise

Traditionally, school systems have managed schools and supervised principals through an administrative branch organized into regional offices led by “area superintendents,” while another branch offered principals occasional professional development on topics not especially targeted to meet their individual needs. Such an approach has made it difficult for school systems to offer principals coherent and consistent job-embedded opportunities to strengthen their leadership practices.

Today, leading school systems are rethinking how central offices can support principals to meet the new expectations for instructional leadership. First, they are identifying highly placed central office leaders who can act as instructional leadership directors (ILDs) responsible for developing principals' knowledge, skills, and effectiveness rather than merely monitoring whether they comply with school system policies. Some school systems are **redefining the role and function of the traditional area superintendent position**. Others are **creating entirely new central office leader positions** dedicated to helping principals strengthen their instructional leadership practices.

Second, leading school systems are creating a wide range of additional aligned supports to help principals grow as instructional leaders. Nearly three out of four partnership sites described **professional development on new teacher evaluation systems**, particularly training to accurately observe lessons and provide feedback based on new instructional frameworks, as a successful recent support for principals' instructional leadership.

In general, however, school systems are finding they do not need to invest in expensive new add-on programs to help principals grow as instructional leaders. Rather, they can repurpose and redesign existing systems, time, and resources to do a better job supporting principals. For example, many school systems are **adapting monthly meetings of principals to provide stronger professional development and support** for instructional leadership.

3. *Enable* principals to succeed as instructional leaders by providing them with sufficient time and strategic supports to perform the job well

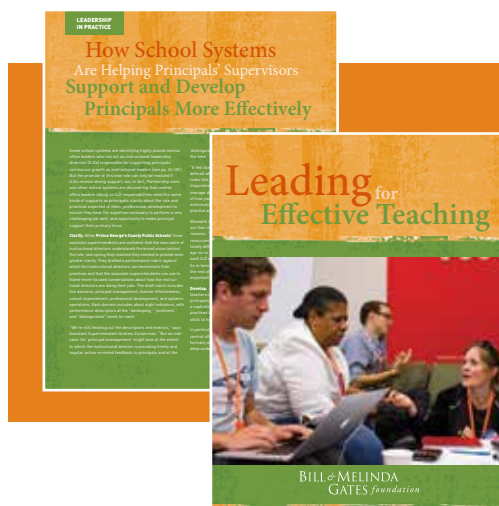
No amount of professional development can enable someone to succeed at an impossible job. Partnership sites and other leading school systems are working on two fronts to make effective instructional leadership feasible.

First, school systems are helping principals strategically expand instructional leadership capacity in their buildings by sharing such responsibilities among multiple leaders. Research has consistently shown that when more staff members share instructional leadership responsibility with principals, classroom teaching and student learning improve more rapidly. As a result, school systems are placing greater emphasis on principals' capacity to build and manage strong **instructional leadership teams** in their schools. Such teams often include expert teachers, instructional coaches, other administrators, and department heads. Under such a scenario, principals become "leaders of instructional leaders" in their schools. The contributions of other instructional leaders *support* rather than *supplant* a principal's own responsibility and authority to lead learning, extending a principal's instructional leadership reach in his or her school building.

Second, school systems are enabling principals to better balance time spent on lower-priority tasks with instructionally focused work and to perform required tasks more efficiently. School systems are leveraging the following strategies to help principals free up more time for instructional leadership:

- **Reducing administrative burdens** by cutting the number of meetings that require principals to leave their school buildings and by eliminating or streamlining paperwork;
- Helping principals **perform tasks more efficiently** by providing them tools and information that facilitate required tasks and by reorienting central office units to provide more personalized support based on principals' individual needs and school context;
- Enhancing capacity to **manage day-to-day operations** by adding or training additional administrative staff members; and
- Providing principals with assistance in **scheduling and defending time** for instructional leadership practices.

The days of simply exhorting principals to be better instructional leaders are ending. Now school system leaders, principals, and teachers must discover new and innovative ways to partner with one another as instructional leaders who continuously improve teaching effectiveness for every student in every classroom.



Go to www.gatesfoundation.org to download the full report, which includes a leadership in practice brief that provides examples of how different school systems are helping to support and develop principals more effectively.

